DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 171 CS 206 779

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TITLE Measuring Density of Details in Composition and Content Courses.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (33rd, San Francisco, CA, March 18-20, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Comparative Analysis; Higher Education; Measurement Techniques; Syntax; *Writing Exercises; Writing Instruction; *Writing Research; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Some composition teachers believe that students may write more competently in subject matter courses than in writing courses. That is, the constraints of writing for a class or assignment in which the composition skills will be evaluated may prevent students from writing their best. With this in mind, a study was conducted to determine whether there is any difference in density and specificity of detail and example between compositions from a subject area class and those from a composition class. Two essays written by students in a freshman level religion course and two essays written by students in two freshman level composition courses were compared. Both classes were given the same assignment and the same period of time in which to write. Density and specificity of development were measured by a scoring procedure which added points for elements that produced detail and subtracted points for elements that avoided detail. While the first free writing exercise produced scores that were neither high nor significantly different between classes, the essays written out of class later in the semester revealed a significant difference. The religion course papers produced higher scores without instruction in writing. (HOD)

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Measuring Density of Details in Composition and Content Courses

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Conference on College Composition and Communication:

March 18, 1982, San Francisco, California

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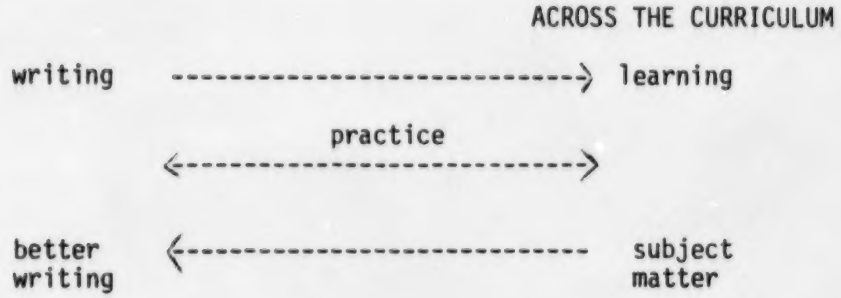
We have discovered some things about writing across the curriculum in the last several years. The work accomplished through the University of California Bay Area Writing Project, known affectionately as BAWP, the discoveries at places like Hunter College and Johnson State College, and the expertise developed by those at Michigan Technological University offer much to us who are interested in interdisciplinary writing and thinking. And these two words, "writing" and "thinking", have been the key terms for the work and research which has been done. There is tacit agreement that writing is useful in all courses because of the close correspondence between writing and learning. So we write/think in business and economics primarily, and in science, engineering, history, physical education, music, art, pre-law, and philosophy, according to the literature. In fact, one source indicates, that "Good writers make good programmers." So the phrase "across the curriculum" usually means "other than English "--faculty involvement in teaching (or emphasizing) writing within their own courses, not, of course, to relieve burden from the English department but to increase the learning potential within their own courses by using writing as a heuristic act. As Arthur Applebee says in his recommendations for teaching writing in secondary schools, ". . . we believe natural contexts will foster and support the learning of information and skills."[1] The emphasis, up to the present, then, has been upon writing across the curriculum which is directed toward thinking and learning. In addition, all of us would agree that such an interdisciplinary emphasis of writing will produce better writers through, as the commercial states so well, "practice, practice, practice." However, I am changing the

direction implicit in writing as a heuristic act in, what is called by some, "content courses". I wonder if writing in and for content courses may be an important factor to improve the writing itself.



Some of us composition teachers share this "hunch" that students may write more competently in what may be considered subject matter courses than in writing courses. We wonder if a greater degree of fluency results from writing which is accomplished in order to communicate information for the sake of information rather than for the sake of the vehicle of communication, the essay itself. Arthur Applebee recommends "creating contexts in which writing serves natural purposes."[2] And we may have the natural purposes ready at hand. The need to write a paper about the Revolutionary War may produce a better composition than one written for Essay #4 in English 101. Indeed, some of us hypothesize that the constraints of writing for a class or assignment in which the composition skills will be evaluated may prevent students from writing their best. If this hypothesis is verified, the importance of writing "across the currculum" is magnified.

One of the first aspects of writing which we might examine is the matter of idea development: the details, examples, and specific references within the writing. This study begins to answer the question: Is there any difference in density and specificity of detail and example between compositions from a subject-matter, non-English class and those from a composition class. A corollary question asks if there is less or more of a difference in density and specificity of detail later in the semester after instruction is given in both classes. Briefly, my hypothesis was that the essays written for a non-composition class assignment will be more textured, will have more specifics and details than those written for composition classes.

I compared the development of ideas in two essays by students in a freshman level religion course at Illinois Wesleyan University to the development in two essays written by students in two freshman level composition courses at Illinois State University during Fall semester, 1981. The assignments were the same for both classes. I gave the first assignment the second week of the semester. It asked the students of both classes to write an in-class response to the same essay, a portion of Viktor Frankl's discussion of life in a concentration camp.[3] I gave both classes the same period of time in which to write. The second piece of writing was a paper assigned to both classes at about the same approximate time which was to be written out of class in response to the same short novel, before the novel was discussed. The novel was Siddhartha, by Hermann Hesse.[4] I taught both courses, so the instructor variable was constant. Both courses were 100 level courses and the majority of students were college freshman. There were 42 subjects total, 14 in each class. The class ranges of ACT

scores were matched; they were 17-26, 17-27, 17-28.

To measure the density and specificity of development, I used the scoring procedure developed by Elmer R. Pry ("An Exercise in Style Analysis," CCC, October, 1979, pp. 307-308). This procedure adds points for elements which produce detail (appositions, proper nouns, descriptive adjectives) and subtracts points for elements which avoid detail ("filler" words, "to be" forms of the main verbs, and structure words).

Frankly, as I began the computations, my heart sank. Wallowing in "definitelies," "actuallies," "I feels," "is whats," "a feeling thats," "reallies," and "sos," I doubted that many students would score any points or that I would escape without a severe case of "very-very" disease myself. After many hours of tedious counting and comparison of the results, I found that my hypothesis had not been denied. The first free-writing exercise produced scores which were neither high nor significantly different between classes. The two composition classes scores were 1.08 and .5, while the religion class scored 1.04. The essays written out of class later in the semester, however, revealed a significant difference. The two composition classes had completed nearly a full semester's instruction which included instruction, discussion, and practice providing details, specifics, and precise, economical diction. Their scores were 13.5 and 14.0. The religion course papers produced an average score of 21.4, without instruction in writing.

Free-writing	Point average
Composition I	1.08
Composition II	.50
Religion	1.04

Out-of-class essays	Point average
Composition I	13.5
Composition II	14.0
Religion	21.4

The topics were identical, as were the novels and the approximate "weight" of the grade. Analysis of the range of points dramatizes the difference further. The ranges of points in the two composition classes were -7 to 43 and -5 to 53, but the essays which earned 43 and 53 points were separated from the next highest points by 9 points and 28 points respectively. In the religion class, the range was -1 to 39, but close on the heels of the 39 were point totals of 36, 35, 33, and 32.

Range of Points (out-of-class essay)

Comp. I	-1 to . . . 34 ----------> 43
Comp. II	-5 to . . . 25 ----------> 53
Religion	-1 to . . . 32, 33, 35, 36, 39

Several other observations can be made. There may be a correlation between essays with low scores and excessive structure words. In all essays (84) there were only two instances of the absolute construction. Even more surprising were the few appositions (3) other than the declaration of the title and author of the novel. There were also only a half dozen significant metaphors or similes. My students appeared to be allergic to all but a few adverbs and their use of proper nouns was more a factor of the assignment. In fact there are probably three reasons for the higher scores in the out of class papers: (1) the increased length of the out of class papers,

(2) the lateness in the semester and consequent practice in thinking and writing, (3) the high number of proper nouns because the papers discussed ideas related to the novel that they had read and they often referred to characters by name. There appeared to be no correlation with grade in course, GPA, or ACT scores with the distinct exception of the religion class. Of the seven highest point scores, five belonged to essays whose authors had the highest ACT scores of the group. My corollary question of more or less difference in density and specificity of detail later in the semester after instruction cannot be affirmed or denied.

I think this is a fertile area for further exploration. Perhaps a better method to measure can be discovered, tested, and verified. There are similarities between the texture observed in this study and the elements of cohesion, specifically "lexical collocations" of M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqauja Hasan as reported in a highly significant article by Stephen Witte and Lester Faigley, "Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality", in the May, 1981 issue of CCC. They, too, recommend research such as this which does not ignore "the features of texts that extend across sentence boundaries."[5] Let me extend to you certain cautions. This is the kind of counting and computation which could be more effectively done by a computer or by graduate assistants. The design for a computer program for such a study would involve great complexity as you can well imagine since English as a word order language only distinguishes, for instance, the preposition "to" from the infinitive "to" by its context. In addition, it would involve an extraordinary amount of time to type the essays into the computer. I had no graduate students; I did not need practice with my numbers; the task was tedious

even on this small scale. Such research as this is expensive in terms of time and people hours. Despite this, I think this study or others like it should be replicated. I will have the opportunity to repeat it in coming semesters. With replication on a wider scale and research with similar related studies, we may find that such a difference between papers written for content courses and those written for composition courses does, indeed, exist. The most difficult part then follows--devising instructional strategies which acknowledge and respond to the difference. The long-range implications of this study and others like it are curricular. If students write more competently within other courses, then perhaps it is within other courses that we should be teaching composition.

Notes

[1]Arthur N. Applebee and others, "Learning to Write in the Secondary School: How and Where," English Journal 70 (1981), 82.

[2]Applebee, p. 82.

[3]Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), pp. 20-24.

[4]Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha, trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: New Directions, 1951).

[5]Stephen P. Witte and Lester Faigley, "Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality," CCC 32(1981), 189.